



*a podcast about
how we learn,
how we teach,
and how they overlap*

Episode 21: What Grades Actually Mean in College

Adam: Hi, I'm Adam Sanford. I'm an academic life coach and professor in Los Angeles.

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Adam: And this is Learning Made Easier, a podcast where we discuss how we learn, and how we teach, and how they overlap.

Dinur: Welcome back to Learning Made Easier. This is Episode 21, where we'll talk about what grades actually mean in college, how that meaning is different than high school, and how to cope when your grades are not perfect straight A's.

Adam: Now, one of the most common issues that college professors run into, with new college students especially, is that most of those students don't understand grades the same way that the professors do. When a student comes to me and says they're crushed about the B-minus they got on an exam or the C+ they've gotten on a paper, for a lot of professors, and up until recently for me, it's confusing at best and kind of annoying at worst. It's like, "Come on, this is a B. This is a B-minus, that's a pretty good grade. Come on, that's a C-plus, that's passing! Why are you so freaked out about this grade?"

Dinur: Because for the professor, for the teacher, the grade is only an evaluation of the quality of the student's work or performance. We're only looking at that paper at that point in time. We're looking at that test or that presentation, no more, no less.

But for a new college student, a grade is something completely different. For a new college student, a grade can feel like a judgment of who they are as a person. Well, Adam and I have discussed the idea of the growth mindset and fixed mindset. Well, this mentality where the grade is who you are, rather than the quality of the work you did, that's a fixed mindset problem. You're seeing your work and yourself as the same thing.

And the student who does this is also assuming that their grade, which so far has only been seen by two people - themselves and the professor - they assume that that grade is seen by everyone in the class, and they might start judging themselves because of that. Refer back to our Episode 19, when we discuss how not to judge yourself harmfully.

Adam: So that's the first thing. Now, there are reasons for why students view the grade the way they do. Most students today are coming into college from high-pressure, high-stakes testing environments in their high schools, where way, way, way too much emphasis is placed on the grade or the score, and parents can also make students feel like anything less than 100 percent is not good enough, and that's a problem that goes outside the walls of the classroom and outside the campus.

I got that kind of pressure, especially from my mom. Being a gifted student, I was expected to be perfect, and if I came home with a test that was at 97 out of 100, I would get yelled at for those missing three points.

So students who are in these high-pressure situations - it's normal that they're going to see an A- as a mark of failure because it's not perfect.

Dinur: On the other hand, many high school teachers don't grade based on the quality of the work, but only on whether the students checked off all the boxes that the teacher has for the work. For example, one of Adam's high school coaching clients showed him a rubric that had things like "has a title" and "has page numbers" as part of the points for a 5-paragraph essay. Well, this box-checking leads students to believe that the grade isn't based on how well they did the work, but whether they just tried to check off a box on the rubric.

Adam: So, given this conditioning, there's a lot of students who think that they should get an A if they follow all the directions and do everything the teacher said to do, whether they did it well or not. Unfortunately, that's not how it works in college.

In college, you're judged not by how much time you put in, or how much work you feel you did, or how much stress you're feeling. You are judged mainly, and often only, by the quality of the work you turned in. Just writing 8 pages doesn't make that a term paper.

So, we've talked in recent episodes about the difference between improvement and perfection, but let's just revisit that idea of perfection again here, because it's relevant to how a lot of students are viewing their grades in college.

Dinur: It's relevant, and the first thing you need to remember is: perfection is impossible to achieve. It's something none of us, ourselves included, are ever going to reach. There's always going to be something else you can do and something else that you can achieve beyond what you've already achieved. Make progress your goal, not perfection.

Adam: The second thing is that it's unrealistic to expect yourself to be perfect, because striving to be perfect sets you up for failure, because then anything that isn't perfect is a failure. It sets you up for stress, because you're stressing out about how to make this perfect when that's not possible, and anxiety, which is that constant stream of worry in your head going, "oh God, I'm not good enough, I'm not good enough, I'm not good enough."

And I've had students come to me and they've asked me why I gave them, you know, a "meets expectations" on a paper, when they feel that since they did all the things that were listed on the rubric, they should have an "exceeds."

And I say, "Well, it's a solid paper, you met the expectation."

And they say, "But I did all the things I'm supposed to do."

And I say, "Right, but you didn't exceed any of them."

And they say, "But I did all the things that you told me to do!"

And I say, "Yes, and the quality of what you did is 'met expectations'."

It takes a long time for students to really get the idea, and some of them never do, that "meets expectations" is a perfectly valid level, it's a B, maybe a high C, all right? But getting to that "exceeds expectations" level, that that B-plus or A-plus area, is really hard to do, because you've got to go beyond just good. You know you've got to go beyond just competent.

And many of them feel that - they don't see that "going beyond" as part of what they're trying to do. They say "You had me do - there are 10 steps on the assignment. I did them all; I should have an A." And that's not the way this works. Because just doing the steps does not mean that they were done perfectly, because they're never done perfectly.

Dinur: And keep in mind that no professor expects you to be perfect. Professors expect your best effort. That's not the same as perfection. We want to see that you're trying, that you're engaged with the material. If you didn't do well on in an early quiz, a test or a paper, that you're trying to correct these mistakes. That's what speaks a lot more to us than a grade.

I know that I had a methods professor in graduate school -

Adam: You've talked about him before.

Dinur: - mm-hmm. And his methods tests were brutal, and he told us, "You are never going to get 100 percent on a test from me, because no one knows 100 percent of everything there is to know about research methods. But I care that you're actually engaged with the material and that you're learning more today than you did last week."

We would get our tests back and it would be “55 or 60 or 65 percent, A-minus,” because he was telling us we're trying to focus on progress and on learning, and the idea is to learn and to improve. It was not for perfection.

Adam: Mm-hmm. And I've had students say to me “Wait, you don't remember that I got at a B- on that test?” No, I don't. I don't. I promise you I don't. I have a lot of students who believe that they are being judged by their grades and I would be willing to bet at least part of that is because a lot of high school teachers do judge their students by their grades. They do remember that that student generally gets C's, and that student generally gets A's. And part of that is because high school teachers' jobs, to some extent, rest on their classes' performance.

So high school teachers have a vested interest in remembering that Maria gets A's and Jose gets B's and Peter gets Ds, because those are the students who need more help or less help, but that's not how it is in college. That's not how it is in college.

And I don't remember what you got on any particular exam. I don't judge you based on what you got on an exam. I don't judge you based on what you got on a paper. What I do judge you based on is “all right, so you've got, you know, a ‘needs improvement’ on this paper. So what needs to improve? Let's talk about this, let's focus on the learning, so that you can eventually move yourself up.”

So when you come from a school background where these two conditions happened - where A's were not a reward for exceptional work, but the basic grade given to anyone who followed all the directions and checked off all the boxes - but you don't know what an A actually stands for; and the other condition is if you come from a school background where more emphasis was placed on your score or your grade than on what you learned, then of course your focus is going to be on the grade and not on the material that gets you the grade. But in college, grades don't mean the same thing as they did in high school. So, most often, this is what grades actually correspond to when we talk about them at a college level.

Dinur: An F means no work is done, or work is done at such a low quality or at such a low standard that it wastes the professor's time to grade it. It's almost insulting that it's turned in. When students turn in F-level work, if they turn it in at all, the message that they're sending to the professor is: they did not prepare, they didn't study, or they didn't care enough to do the work at the level of expected in college. And that's why it's insulting. We're there because we're trying to teach you material; we're trying to teach you skills to help you learn, and if you turn in F-quality work, you're telling us that it's not worth your time or your energy.

Adam: And you may not mean it that way, but it still comes across that way. When you turn in something... when I've had students who have been told “write two paragraphs” and they turn in two sentences - they didn't try, and they may think they tried, but they didn't try. You need to really look at “what kind of effort am I putting in?” and if you're turning in two sentences when

you're asked for two paragraphs, that's F level work. That's wasting my time, that's wasting Dinur's time, that's wasting your professor's time to grade it.

Now a D is "Ok you did some work, but you didn't do it well enough to meet the standard set by the professor in the class for basic completion of the work assigned." So when students turn in D-level work, what that tells us, as professors, is that the student is skimming, skimping or skipping over the important points, and just filling in a space or checking off a box - and there's that box-checking again. But in D-level work, there's very little, if any thought apparent. It's more like - not even memorizing, it's more like "I copied these answers out of the book or off the web page" and that's as far as they got, and that's not something that deserves better than a D.

Dinur: Now C means average, and that is a really hard lesson for a lot of people to hear. C means average. This is the basic level that all professors expect of college students. When students turn in C-level work, they've answered all questions at the minimum level expected for competency in the course, but they haven't pressed beyond that point.

So you've shown that you can check off all the boxes and you can give decent answers to them, but you haven't really taken that extra step to go beyond. If all you're doing is completing homework to the bare minimum standard or writing papers by their page count, this is probably the grade that you're going to get.

Adam: Now I will say, too, that there are some students who say "I just need a C in this class to get by," "I need a C in this class to keep my sports eligibility," "I need a C in this class to keep my scholarship," "I need a C in this class to keep my financial aid," "I need a C in this class just so I can get done with it and get on with my life." And if the C is what you are aiming for, and that is what you want, we are not telling you that you are a bad person for wanting an average grade. If that's what you need to finish our class and get out and you're never going to take another class in our discipline again, hey, go for it. You know, if you're working a job, and you've got 4 other classes, and a C is just what you need to do to get done and get out, it's OK to be average. Because C stands for competency. It means that you got enough that you passed the basic minimum for the class.

Now with a B - that's above average. Now this is where we begin to see students who go the extra mile. They're not just answering the question. They're also making a point of investigating the question and they're trying to respond at a level above that baseline competency. So this student's work is going to show us a better level of comprehension or understanding of the material than we expected them to have. This level of work - it may have a few errors, but the quality of the work exceeds the expectations of course.

Dinur: And finally, an A - superior level work. This is a level that is not easily achieved. This student goes beyond the extra mile, and does their best to produce professional-quality work, like they're trying to get it published in a journal. This level of work has been combed over, it's

been checked to reduce and eliminate errors, it shows a high level of understanding and comprehension of the material, and the quality of the work is observably better than B-level.

For me, personally, A-level work is something that teaches me something or is analyzed especially creatively or especially thoroughly. It just wows me in some way. And very few papers wow me, but the papers that wow me are the ones that get A's .

Adam: And for me, the way that I judge the difference between a B and an A usually, a B tells me everything that you learned from the research or from the materials presented the class. So you use the reading; you used the lectures; you use the videos and the podcasts and whatever else you've been given; you analyze it well; you explain it well.

A-level work goes beyond that. In A-level work I begin to see your insights, your personal connections to this material, where you not just analyze it, but you begin to say, "and this also connects to this other social issue" or "and these two things actually go together in this way which is unexpected." When I begin to see unexpected analyses, and again, like Dinur said, if it teaches me something, if I look at that and go, "You know, I would never have thought of that, that's amazing," that's going to be in a paper that gets an A.

Dinur: And for me, if you can make connections between material in my class and material in other classes and you show me how they relate, that's another way that you can wow me or teach me something. Because maybe you're taking a class in an area that I know very little about and all of a sudden, I go, "you know, that makes a lot of sense, I wouldn't have thought of that."

Adam: Now, here's the way that teachers can use this information.

First, be aware, given their high school backgrounds, a lot of your students are going to think that anything less than an A means that they're a failure, and that getting an A means checking off all the boxes. These are two things they're coming in with from high school - two beliefs about how grades work that are completely incorrect. So, it's really important to get them to understand that that is not the case: that checking off all the boxes does not guarantee an A, and that not getting an A does not make them a failure.

And make it personal. Say, "I am not going to judge you based on your grade. I'm just judging your work. And you are not your work. Your work is what you've produced, but you are not your work, and I am not going to look at this and say, 'Mary is stupid.' I might say, 'This work that Mary did need some help in these five areas, so I'm going to talk with her about it,' but that's not judging Mary. That's not saying that Mary is a bad person."

So it's really important to make this very clear to your students very early on in the course.

If you can do it on the first day, do it on the first day. Go over these five ways that this is how grades are in college. We will put a list in the show notes, so that you can download it, and you could hand it out, and say “Here, look at this, this is what grades mean in college,” and then have a class discussion about it. But make sure that your students know that we don't think you're a failure just because you didn't get an A.

Dinur: Oh, and teachers, we have to be upfront with our students about what our grades actually mean. We do not get to assume that our students look at a list of grades and understand it the same way we do. So early in the term be upfront with students so you don't expect everyone to get an A, and that you don't think less of students who get Cs. Make it perfectly clear that Cs are acceptable, passing grades, because they demonstrate competence, and competence is good enough to earn a degree.

Adam: And we've seen this show up in our classes, and with our students, so many times.

The other problem, too, is that a lot of students come in believing that the teachers are out to trick them, and we've talked about this in prior episodes. You know, Dinur, I remember you saying “Why would I do that? What motivation would I have for doing that?”

And your students are “Oh, I never thought about it that way.”

You know, I've had students say “Where's the trick?” and I say, “There isn't one, and if you find one, come tell me because I need to make sure there isn't one,” and they say, “... what?”

It's very difficult for them to understand that no, we are not actually out to trick them. So a lot of students are already... I won't say paranoid, but they definitely have a - they're nerve-wracked about this idea, that the teacher is hiding something that they have to figure out. Make sure that that's not how grades are for these students. Make sure that you are absolutely, transparently, crystal clear with your students about “this is what an A means in this class, this is what a B means, this is what a D means,” so that they know, when they get that grade back, this is what that means, you know: “this D means that I did not go deep enough. This B means that I did really well and if I had stretched, I might have done a little better, but I did really well.”

And sometimes it's going to be very difficult to convince students and you just have to keep reiterating, “Remember: this is what a B means. Remember: this is what a C means,” so that they will stop freaking out about the C that they got in your class.

Dinur: Absolutely, one of the things that I tend to tell my students with term papers for example, is I'll tell them “Here's what the C- level grade under term paper means, it means you've entered these questions, you might have given a surface level analysis but you didn't really dig deep, you just tried to answer the question on its face and that's perfectly fine. A B-level paper, well now you're trying to go a little bit more in depth, you're trying to make connections between some of the material that's available and you're going beyond just the surface. And A-level,

again, is something that wows me.” And so I try to make it very clear what I'm looking for, I'll tell them that a C-level paper doesn't have a strong thesis and it doesn't feel very well organized, whereas a B paper does, and an A paper definitely does.

Adam: If you make me work hard to understand what you're talking about, your grade goes down, because the quality of your paper is lower and lower, every time I have to try to figure out what you said. So the clearer you can be, the better your score is going to be, and they say “That's not what my English teacher told me!” and it's like “Well, this isn't an English class”.

Dinur: Now I tell my students “The faster you make your points, the faster I give you your points,” so very similar thoughts. Write directly. Write to the point. But we try to explain what the grades mean so that students hopefully reduce this anxiety.

Adam: Now here's how students can use this information: the first thing is that when you focus on the grades that tends to encourage you to have a fixed mindset. You don't want a fixed mindset in college. So you need some ways to break the idea that “anything less than A means you're a failure,” because you're coming in with that from high school. So here are some different ways to break that idea so that you can start saying, “hey, I got a C+, that's pretty good.”

Dinur: One, you want to focus on your trend, and not on the actual grade. If you're getting all C's in your first semester and now you've increased to a C+ in the second semester, well, that's a great improvement. You've stepped up a whole grade step, but don't expect to get an A, or even a B, just because you check off all the boxes for assignments on your professor's syllabus. So if you're seeing an increase in your grade, it should be because you're putting in more effort, and you're trying to develop your skills a little bit more, beyond just fulfilling the requirements.

Adam: And that is something that takes time. Remember that taking a step, you might have to rest up at that new step a little bit, and then take another step, and then take another step. Don't expect to run up all the steps from C to A in one semester. There are skills you need to build. There's self-discipline that you need to build. There are habits that you need to build in order to get to the point where you're consistently cranking out high level grades, and until you've built those skills and built those habits, you're going up the steps one step at a time.

Now, the second thing is to remember that C stands for competent and Cs get degrees. A lot of students see a C as one step above failure and the slippery slope down to failure, but here's a secret for all y'all. Do you know what they call a student who graduates from college with a 2.65 GPA?

They call them a college graduate. They don't call them a “2.65 college graduate.” They don't call them a “C-level college graduate.” You're just a plain college graduate, because once you are done with college, the only people who will ever see your GPA again are grad schools, law schools or med schools, should you choose to go on after you finish a bachelor's degree. When

employers contact schools during a job interview, they do that to find out when you attended and if you graduated, but they're not going to ask for your GPA . They don't care, all they care is that you have the piece of paper that says you put in the time and work to get this degree.

Dinur: And the third tip we have for students is treat the grade as an indicator of one point in time. Many students get hung up on the grade as an indicator of their self-worth and that is both inaccurate, it is damaging. Grades are not about who you are, they are only about what you have or have not done. Treat the grade as one single bit of data, not as a label that you have to wear forever. Sometimes B or B- students stand out way more than A students, depending on how that B or B- was earned.

For example, one of my first semesters teaching, I had a student who was non-traditional. He was older, and he started my semester but I writing papers at a D-level in college, but by the end of the term it been writing at about a B- or B level. So he had taken a lot of steps, he had improved drastically and that stands out to me.

I've had students who have absolutely bombed my first exam, gotten Ds or Fs, and they've worked their way up to Bs in the course or, I think in one case, an A-, and generally they worked their way up to a B. And that is one hell of an improvement and stories like that stand out to me way more than "this person just did really, really well on my tests". I'm happy for them, I certainly don't take anything away from them, and generally, A students are engaged - but it's them being engaged that I remember. I don't remember the grade itself.

Adam: And another thing to remember, too, is that the GPA, by and large, is not noticeable. Earning the degree is noticeable, it's notable. And going back to Dinur's talking about progress, you have one indicator at one point in time. "The first test - I bombed it and I got an F. OK, what did I do that got that F? What can I change to make sure that the next time I do a test I don't get an F?"

So, if you treat the grade as an indicator of one point in time, you can also treat it as an indicator of what you did or didn't do at that point in time. And that's how you actually get to progress and improvement, where you say: "All right, I studied the night before by cramming. And of course I didn't sleep. I drank two cans of Monster. I went to the test; I was freaked out; I was stressed out; I was not reading the questions more than once, and I wasn't understanding what I was reading. And I was totally stressed and I pulled an F. So, how am I going to change that for the next exam? Well, I'll start studying at least a week before the exam. I will study every day for an hour or two. I won't cram, and I'll get a full night's sleep, so that I'm not having to run on two cans of Monster and an hour of sleep."

So, that should improve your grade right there, just changing your study skills and changing what you do the day of the exam, or the night before and the day of the exam, can help you get a new point in time that shows a trend upward.

So this kind of goes back to “focus on the trend.” Treat the grade as one indicator of one point in time. A bunch of points in time create a trend. If you keep getting higher and higher and higher scores every time, because you've examined what you did with the previous grade or with the previous point in time, and you changed it up a little bit to change the way you're doing it to make it more effective, you're more likely to get higher grades to get an upward trend.

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Dinur: Be sure to join us next week for Episode 22, when we will dig into why talking about what you're learning will help you learn, even if you're talking to people who know nothing about the topic.

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Adam: And we look forward to seeing you next time.